

Using the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Model of Organization to Improve Fifth Grade Writing

Melinda Sterling, Jo Olson, and Trish Hauf

Black Hills State University

Instructor: Kristi L. Pearce, Ed.D.

ED692

Abstract

In order to determine an effective way to teach the South Dakota state writing standards to fifth grade students, the action research involved implementing the 6 +1 Writing Traits Model during writing workshop in two fifth grade classrooms. Fifty-six students participated in this study. The homeroom classroom teachers and the general educator were also research participants. The fall 2004 writing test scores indicated a need for more instruction in the organization trait. Keeping those test results and the South Dakota state standards in mind, our action research question was; how does concentrated instruction of the organization trait, a component of the 6 + 1 traits model, improve student writing? The results of our study showed an improvement in student and teacher attitudes toward writing. Students' papers became more organized following the implementation of mini-lessons directed at teaching the specific trait of organization. Using literature that demonstrated a variety of organizational techniques was also successful. At times students resisted new organizational methods. Even with our encouragement, some writers were unsuccessful in implementing new and different strategies. Overall, we felt the concentrated effort on teaching organization during writing workshop with the 6+1 writing traits model was effective in improving student writing.

Introduction

A letter, faded and worn with time, from a grandmother remembered for her fresh baked cookies, open, loving arms and an understanding heart; a note from a grandson that explodes with excitement about his first lost tooth; a letter from a soldier stationed in a

war-torn country to his mom...all of these letters are pieces of art. Perhaps, some say, a lost art. *The Art of Teaching Writing*, a book by Lucy Calkins, considers writing an art. Not only is the actual writing an art, but also the teaching of writing. Calkins reminds us that “spoken words fade away, but print fastens our thoughts onto paper” (1994, p. 222). The written piece is the expression of the feelings, the personalities and the lives of the people who write it. Through correct instruction, this art can be nurtured and enhanced so that it encourages one to write continuously throughout one’s life.

With quality instruction, writing can be developed into an expression of art. But, is writing given quality instruction and is the writer given time to write? Writing is not generally stressed in schools. It is not being taught in accordance with the South Dakota state standards and sometimes not being taught at all. Perhaps this is why fifth grade students are often unable to exhibit organizational skills in their writing, as shown by the results of the standardized writing assessment. Following the fall fifth grade writing assessment, it was concluded that many students lacked organizational skills in their writing. In fact, this area scored the lowest on the writing prompt. It was evident that a concentrated effort on teaching students how to organize their writing was required.

The question is what do educators do, and specifically how do educators help students learn how to organize their writing? What are the best new strategies that would assist educators in their efforts to implement the South Dakota state writing standards and bring back the art of writing? How can educators improve their methods of teaching and assessing writing? What are the best practices to teach children how to produce clearly organized narrative and descriptive pieces? What are the best practices in assessing the organizational writing skills of the writer? And, most importantly, how do educators

bring back this art and help children learn how to express their feelings, their personalities and their lives through writing?

The children in this study are students at Corral Drive Elementary School which is situated in an upper middle class neighborhood. There are 437 students enrolled in this school. The population is 95% Caucasian. The remaining 6% include Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans and Hispanics. We serve twenty-two free or reduced lunches in our food service program. The actual research took place in Jo Olson's and Trish Hauf's fifth grade homerooms. There were 28 students in Jo Olson's room which included 16 boys and 12 girls. Trish Hauf's homeroom had 17 boys and 11 girls. Student abilities were varied. Sixteen students were identified as talented and gifted, one student received section 504 services, and three were on Individual Education Plans. Students from divorced and single parent homes made up a low percentage of the population. The general educator, Melinda Sterling, participated in each of the fifth grade classroom activities 120 minutes a week. Data was collected for a four-week period of time during our scheduled writing workshop.

6 +1 Writing Traits Model

Research indicates that following the 6 + 1 Writing Traits Model, with its many components during writing workshop, is a possible solution to the lack of organization in student writing. The 6 + 1 Writing Traits Model is defined as a process that guides teacher instruction as students revise and edit their writing. The 6 + 1 analytical traits of writing include: Ideas and Content, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions, and Presentation. Today, the trait model is used throughout the United States and many countries (Van Hoet-Hill & Wright, 2000). It involves many grade levels and many subject areas. The 6 + 1 trait model is a form of analytic

assessment, a method of looking at the main characteristics of writing and assessing them independent from one another. (Culham, 2003) This model gives the teachers and students a common vocabulary for talking about and working with writing. It includes writing in a variety of genres and content areas, including research. These writings may be assigned or self-selected. The writing workshop provides instructional support through its components of mini-lessons, conferencing, editing and revising (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). For this research project, mini-lessons were designed to teach students how to organize their written work.

Ruth Culham compares the art of teaching organization to herding cats. She states that in many papers, students ideas are scattered all over like cats on the prairie and the teacher, working with the student, has to round them up and get them going in the same direction. “The art of getting those ideas together, heading them out on the trail with a great sendoff; creating sequence, transitions, and a fine sense of pacing along the way; and, at the end of the drive, rounding them up, falls under the trait of organization” (1995, p. 68). Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory conducted several studies on the use of the 6+1 Writing Traits model. These studies used similar methodology, pre and post training scores with growth data recorded (Jarmer, Kozol, Nelson, & Salsberry, 2000). Through our research it was found that the use of the 6+ 1 Writing Traits Model to diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses was helpful in determining our next instructional step.

Teachers need to develop consistency in using the scoring guide provided with the 6 +1 Writing Traits Model. Once teachers are aware of students’ areas of need, instruction should be focused on those skills. The analytical scoring system of this model is valid, honest, and practical.

Method

Jo, Trish, and Melinda met every Monday night to develop lesson plans. We concentrated on designing mini-lessons to enhance the students' organization abilities in their writing. A variety of books, posters, and examples of personal writing were used to illustrate the mini-lesson strategies. An assortment of techniques to organize their writing was taught. The following sample mini-lessons were used.

Lesson One

Target Trait: Organization

Focus: Good beginnings

Materials:

Rachel Carson, Friend of the Earth, Francene Sabin

John Henry, Julius Lester

Bully for You, Teddy Roosevelt, Jean Fritz

The Story of Thomas Alva Edison, Margaret Davidson

Method:

This lesson is designed to teach students how to write good introductions for their biographies. The use of dialogue, action, forming a picture, quotes, exaggerations and interesting facts are ideas given to the students. Students gather around the author's chair as the teacher reads aloud introductions from actual biography books. The class discusses good introductions and poor introductions. Students return to desks to write their own introductions. After several minutes of writing, volunteers share their work.

Lesson Two

Target Trait: Organization

Focus: *Satisfying conclusions*

Materials:

Poster of how to write a satisfying ending

Poster of before and after story ending

Method:

Teacher will use an analogy to describe how a satisfying ending should be written and will discuss the ingredients of a satisfying ending:

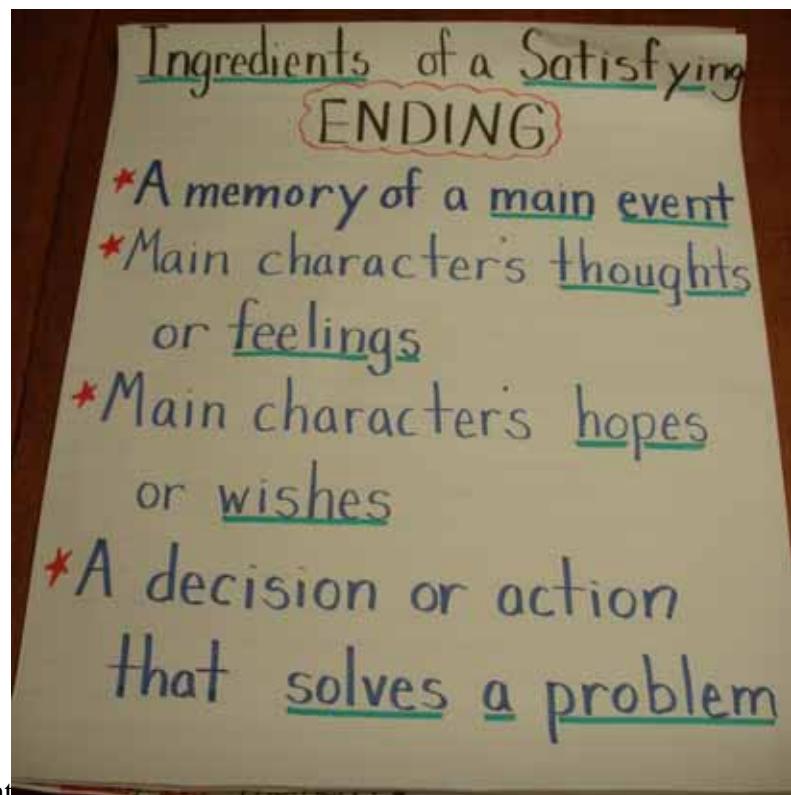
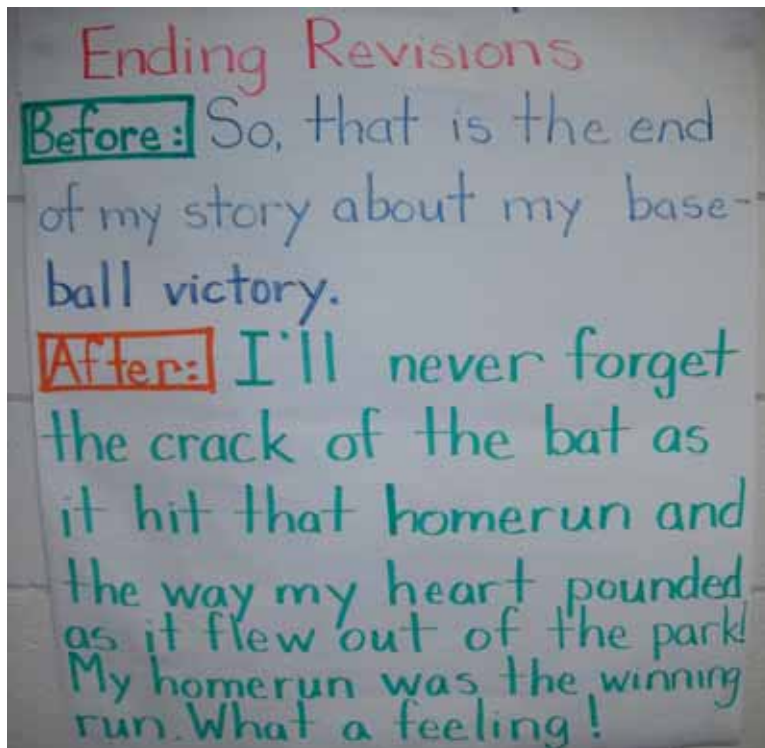
Memory of a main event

Main character's thoughts or feelings

Revisit main character's hopes or wishes

Decision or action that solves a problem

Teacher will compare the ending of a story to an airplane ride or carnival ride referring to the posters throughout the discussion. Examples of other fifth grade students' revised work will be shared. Students will be directed to revise the conclusion of their own piece of work. Students will be encouraged to share their revised conclusions.



Lesson Three

Target Trait: Organization

Focus: How to organize thought

Materials:

Book – *The Memory String* by Eve Bunting

Charm bracelets (optional)

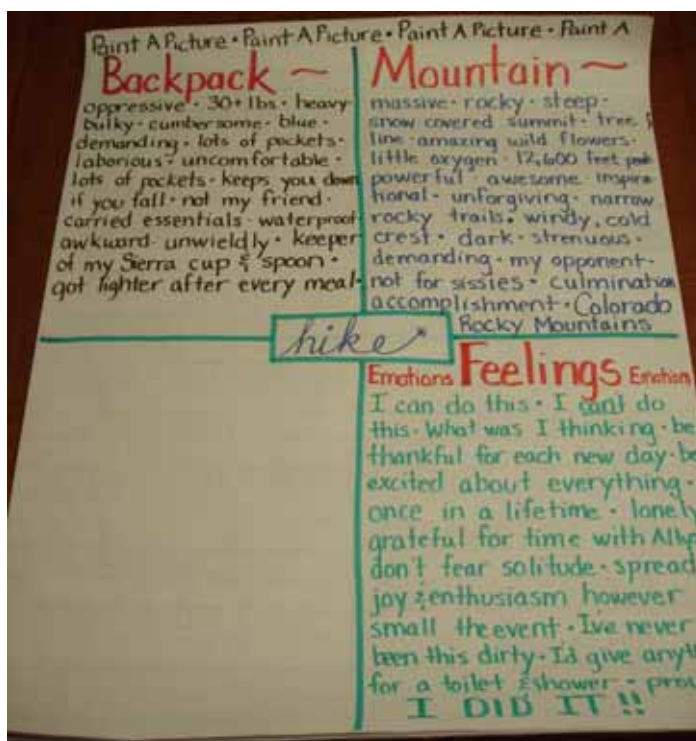
Poster displaying a complete example of the process

The Hike

Noun (example:backpack)	Noun (example: mountain)
-heavy -blue-cumbersome...	-above the treeline-rocky-massive-snowy-not for sissies...
Noun (example: food)	Thoughts/Feelings/Emotions
-creative-welcome-good actually...	-I can do this-I can't do this-proud-tired...

Method:

Teachers will read *The Memory String*. The class will discuss how each button represented a small moment in the character's life. The teachers will relate the story to their personal charm bracelets. Students will be instructed to recall a small moment and develop an organizational box. Teachers will allow time for students to share.



Discussion of pre, during, and post student survey results. We were pleased that in the short amount of time we had, the results of the survey (Appendix A) showed an

increase in the number of students who liked writing. Many of the students' responses had not changed from survey to survey. We saw an increase in the number of students who enjoyed writing about their families and their personal experiences. They still felt that getting ideas and rewriting were the most difficult aspects of the writing process. Students were encouraged to make comments on the survey. "I like to write because it's fun. It opens your imagination and can take you anywhere." Another comment was, "Use the wild side of your brain." These were a few of the many positive remarks written by students on the surveys. Another interesting comment was, "I do not like to write because I have bad handwriting, but I like writing." Of course there were negative responses as well. "It's boring." and "It takes too much time." were mentioned several times. During our Monday night discussions, we pondered the thought of how many people, even though they like to write, would choose writing as a favorite pastime.

Discussion of pre, during, and post teacher interview results. In the teacher pre-interview (Appendix B) we discussed our own attitudes about writing and the teaching of writing. None of us write for the pleasure of writing with the exception of writing letters. Melinda does write journals to her four daughters and Trish states that she enjoys writing Christmas letters. We stated that we all write for graduate level classes and feel a sense of accomplishment and pride at its completion. Both Melinda and Jo write along with their students during writing workshop time. Trish feels that she has not been able to do as much of this due to the students with high needs in her classroom that require her assistance. Prior to our interventions, all of us agreed that the only method we used to teach organization was telling the students to use a beginning, middle, and an end. Before taking the 6+1 Writing Traits class, we assessed the student work with an overall grade and did not enjoy the process at all.

After participating in this class offered by our school district, we were excited to implement our newfound knowledge. During the intervention phase, mini-lesson ideas were provided from our class and we implemented them into our writing workshop. We began to see the benefits of using children's literature, our own writing and the students' writing for the teaching of organization. We concentrated on one specific trait in our mini-lessons and found this to be helpful. We were very deliberate about teaching organization skills. We felt that we almost forced different organizational techniques on the students so they could experience a variety of techniques hoping they would latch on to one or two strategies that work best for them. Throughout our intervention stages, we felt more confident because all three of us had taken the class and also felt that our teaching was changing during this time.

During our post interview we discussed the success of implementing the writing traits into our writing workshop time. We felt that we became better teachers of writing and the students learned how to organize their writing in a variety of ways. Tricia stated that she has become more organized in her own writing and sees the importance of participating in writing workshop along with her students. She felt her students enjoyed and appreciated hearing her personal examples.

Assessment is still an issue. Concentrating on just the one trait of organization made it more manageable, yet the process was still very time consuming. It helped us to see where our instruction should lead, but it did not necessarily provide us with a grade. One student said, "How do you assess something that comes from the heart?" Now we know how...we assess the writing not only on its theme or idea, but on other specific traits as well.

Discussion of pre and post writing prompt results. A writing prompt was given to the students at the beginning of the year. The same prompt was given after four weeks of intense writing instruction on the trait of organization. A random sampling of both the pre and post prompt was scored by Melinda, using the rubric from the book by Ruth Culham, *6 +1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide Grades Three and Up*. The results from the pre and post writing prompts were informative. Our scoring showed that of the ten randomly chosen students, eight students increased their scores by at least two points on a five-point scale. One student showed no improvement and one student's score decreased by one point. Five students increased their score from a three to a five in the area of writing inviting introductions and satisfying conclusions. Four students increased their use of thoughtful transitions and connecting ideas from a score of a one to a five. Five students improved their sequencing skills from a score of three to a score of five. Paragraphing was a concern in the pretest, but posttest scores showed that five students went from a score of one to a score of five, and two students improved from a three to a five.

Although there were great improvements, it was evident that some students did not improve. We did notice that there was a significant gap in our writer's abilities that increased even more following our writing interventions. It would be interesting if there were a correlation between the writers who showed no improvement and the students who displayed poor attitudes toward writing on the writing survey.

Conclusion

We feel that implementing 6 +1 Writing Traits Model into our writing workshop format was an effective method to teach the trait of organization to fifth graders. The students were able to produce clearly organized narrative and descriptive pieces. They were able to utilize organizational techniques that had been taught to them. The assessment of writing is still an issue even though we chose to only assess the organizational trait.

In our literature review we stated that our goal was to find the best practice to teach the organization of writing in order to meet the South Dakota state standards. Equally as important was our desire to bring back the art of writing. We feel, as educators, we allowed children to express their feelings, their personalities, and their lives through writing. We have come to know our students in a different light.

Our action plan is to continue to teach the 6 +1 Writing Traits during writing workshop. Because assessment of student writing was, and still is, a major concern, we feel the need to change how we acquire grades for writing. Choosing one trait to assess per project will help alleviate this issue. Using the provided 6+1 Writing Traits rubrics is another planned change.

Another helpful modification, and one we are presently pursuing, is to include the general educator in our weekly grade level planning sessions. This would eliminate the Monday night planning and would also include all fifth grade teachers.

Although it is unlikely, we would like to have input on how the standardized writing test is administered. We feel that how the standardized test is administered is in direct conflict with how we teach writing. Giving students ample time to ponder the writing prompt, organize their thoughts, and revise and edit are changes we would like to see happen.

Our goal for writing workshop next year is to begin the year by implementing the 6+1 Traits model in our writing workshop time. With this yearlong intervention, we hope to see more impressive gains in student work. Since we are dedicated to bringing writing back as a chosen art, we are committed to the teaching of writing.

References

- Calkins, L.M. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- (Original work published 1986)
- Culham, R. (1995). *6+1 traits of writing the complete guide grades 3 and up*. New York: Scholastic Professional Books.
- Fountas, I. C. & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Guiding readers and writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Jarmer, D. , Kozol, M., Nelson, S., & Salsberry, T. (2000, Fall/Winter). Six-trait writing model improves scores at Jennie Wilson Elementary. *Journal of School Improvement, 1* (2), 1-5.
- Van Hoet-Hill, G. & Wright, J. (2000). *Impact of the 6+1 trait writing assessment model*. Portland, OR : Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Appendix A

Fifth Grade Student Self-Evaluation Survey

- Circle Male or Female How many years at Corral Drive? _____
1. Tell three reasons you like or do not like to write.
 2. Where do you get your ideas to write about? Check as many as apply.
 _____ books _____ group discussions
 _____ personal experiences _____ family stories
 _____ assigned prompts _____ other

 3. What do you think is the hardest part about writing? Why?
 (Getting an idea, filling the page, spelling and punctuation, rewriting etc.)
 4. What kind of writing do you like to do and what do you like about this type of writing?
 _____ fiction _____ poetry
 _____ fantasy _____ non-fiction
 _____ research _____ journaling
 _____ letter writing
 5. What feelings do you have when you are asked to write a report for social studies or science? Why?
 6. Tell me what makes a good paragraph?
 7. List the steps you would follow when assigned to write a research report.
 8. What writing techniques do you use in your own writing?
 9. What is the purpose of the Daily Oral Language sentence?
 10. What do you do differently when you know your writing will be graded?

Appendix B

Informal Teacher Interview

1. What do you like and dislike about writing?
2. When do you write?
3. For what purpose do you write?
4. How were you taught to write?
5. Did you like writing in school?
6. Do your students like to write?
7. Do you teach writing and how do you?
8. Do you feel pressured to teach writing?
9. Do you like to teach writing?
10. What keeps you from teaching writing?
11. In a perfect world, what would make teaching writing manageable?
12. What are your thoughts on the fifth grade writing assessment?
13. How would you like to see it administered?

